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## The Braves / Yankees World Series

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When Charlie Hayes went falling into the third-base dugout and failed to make the catch on Mark Lemke's pop foul to end the sixth and final game of the World Series there was a brief moment of hope when Braves fans thought just maybe fate had turned. It had not. On the next pitch Hayes made the catch down the third-base side near the stands and the 1996 World Series was history. Only five nights earlier Atlanta fans had been talking about the possibility of a sweep, but not the one that occurred.

It seemed as if fate was operating in this Series as the Braves missed every opportunity to score, gave up runs in the most peculiar of fashion, and saw bizarre umpiring decisions and characteristically strange managerial decisions all work against them. Was it some karma coming off Joe Torre's personal burdens of a dead and dying brother, or the prayers from the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary School in Queen's led by the principal Sister Marguerite, also the sister of Joe Torre? From the catch of Jeffery Maier to the three-run homer by Jim Leyritz off a Mark Wohlers slider, it seemed like a special force was with these Yankees.

And these were the Yankees of Joe Torre constructed by Bob Watson, baseball's only Black General Manager, run on the field by a committee consisting of Torre, Don Zimmer and Mel Stottlemeyer with occasional input from a host of other coaches. They were the farthest thing from the George Steinbrenner Yankees than any Yankee team in recent memory. George himself took credit only for supplying the money and turning around Australian reliever Graeme Lloyd by insisting he get a haircut.

Just before Game two in New York Joe Torre told Steinbrenner that they would probably lose that night, then go to Torre's lucky town, Atlanta, sweep the Braves, and then come back home to Yankee Stadium and clinch the Championship on Saturday night. One wonders if after the loss in Game two Torre was so confident of his prediction. By the end of Game four however he probably had no doubts at all.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that I thought Joe Torre was a great manager because he could hold a team on a steady course in the midst of too much elation or too much adversity. He is a great manager of people. He certainly showed that once again in this Series and this season, and he showed that he also had improved

as a tactician as well. Torre credits much of his tactical skill to the advice of the two men who sit next to him. Mel Stottlemeyer knows his pitchers and Don Zimmer knows his baseball.

Whenever I see Torre and Zimmer together, which was quite often over the past three weeks, I think of two memorable descriptions from the literature of baseball. The first is the tag that Bill Lee hung on Don Zimmer when Zimm was trying to manage the Red Sox. Lee called him The Gerbil, and every time I see Zimm it is the first thing that goes through my head. It is such an accurate description of the round and lumpy face with the bug eyes that look into or beyond the camera. The other phrase concerns Joe Torre. In his book Ball Four Jim Bouton described the wild nightlife of the Yankees, and in one passage described a woman as being so ugly that she looked like Joe Torre. It's odd what sticks in the brain over a stretch of time, but both of those are stuck in mine.

My other memory of Don Zimmer is from my youth in Minneapolis when Zimm was a fiercely competitive shortstop for the hated St. Paul Saints, a Dodger farm team. Zimmer was hit in the head by a pitch which nearly ended his career and his life. If he was wearing any kind of protection, and I am not sure he was, it was one of those small liners that fit inside the baseball cap. On his return to baseball and with the Dodgers he was beamed a second time with again near fatal consequences. He came back from these bean balls without any noticeable affect on his game, although they shortened his career and he still carries a metal plate in his skull from the surgery that followed. There were jokes about improved radio reception when Zimm was in the area. Maybe it was the metal plate that made lightening strike for the Yankees in the extraordinary post-season run that ended last Saturday night.

Zimmer and Torre seemed to be in perpetual conversation throughout the games. Torre says that he never makes any move without bouncing it off The Gerbil and he clearly appreciates Zimm's experience as four-time manager, the multiple coaching jobs, with nearly all his sixty-five years spent in baseball.

One must also appreciate this World Series for the multiple mini-dramas it presented, especially over the final three games, which showed repeatedly what it is about baseball that totally enthralls so many of us who have watch it for so many years, and why we will continue to do so regardless of what happens off the field.

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